

CAFTA Was Sold on Farming, Security

By Bill Lambrecht
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President George W. Bush narrowly won passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement by invoking two enduring rallying cries in American politics - agriculture and national security.

Bush eked out the 217-215 victory in the House early Thursday after becoming personally involved in heavy White House lobbying and after the Republican leadership extended voting time well past what is customary to reverse what had been shaping up as CAFTA's defeat.

Just 15 House Democrats voted for the trade agreement, among them Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, the only House member from Missouri or downstate Illinois to break party ranks.

The exceptional circumstances and polarized vote suggested that upcoming trade pacts like the global agreement now being negotiated will be more difficult to pass, trade experts said.

"You can sell anything in America if you call it agriculture or national security, and even using both they won by just two votes," said Clyde Prestowitz, a trade negotiator in the Reagan administration and author of a new bestseller, "Three Billion New Capitalists: The Great Shift of Wealth and Power to the East."

I.M. Destler, a University of Maryland professor and trade expert, said he saw "substantial anxiety" about trade and globalization despite CAFTA's passage. "Trade policy continues to be in political trouble, given the narrow margin of passage even after squeezing people like they did," said Destler, author of the book "American Trade Politics."

Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-Mo., said he heard other members say repeatedly while working on the

House floor against CAFTA that NAFTA - the 12-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement - had not lived up to its promises.

"I think it was a combination of the environment we are in with job losses in our country and having protections historically in these trade agreements either watered down or insufficient," he said.

Rep. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., the House majority whip, played down reports that the White House was offering favors in return for votes. But he acknowledged that "it didn't hurt" to have the \$286.5 billion highway bill - packed with projects for House members' districts - still on the calendar while he and other CAFTA proponents rounded up votes.

"We weren't below saying we'll check and see how you're doing on those projects," Blunt said.

The CAFTA agreement, approved by the Senate last month, phases out trade tariffs over 20 years with five Central American countries and the Dominican Republic. It also puts an immediate end to duties they charge for many farm imports from the United States.

The five Central American countries that will become part of a new free trade zone are: Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The National Corn Growers Association and the American Soybean Association, both based in St. Louis, trumpeted CAFTA's passage as a big win for farmers.

Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., noted that the agreement would end tariffs that can reach as high as 30 percent on soybean exports. "With Illinois the second largest exporter of soybeans in the nation, our soybean producers will directly benefit," Shimkus said.

Rep. Jo Ann Emerson of Cape Girardeau, Mo., was among Republicans who remained undecided until the day of the vote.

She said she decided to vote for CAFTA on behalf of rice farmers in her district who export to Central America and out of fear that its failure to pass could expand the influence of Venezuela's leftist president, Hugo Chavez.

"You have very, very fragile democracies in that part of the world, and I just think it's important to keep our neighborhood under control," she said.

Skelton has supported trade pacts over the years, but CAFTA opponents were hopeful this time of winning him over.

In the end, Skelton, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, listed national security as a primary consideration in supporting the agreement. He argued that voting against the trade agreement would send the wrong message at a time when Americans are fighting abroad in the name of democracy.

Recalling words of former President Jimmy Carter, Skelton said, "We have a chance to reinforce democracies in the region. This is the moment to move forward and to help those leaders who want to modernize and humanize their countries."